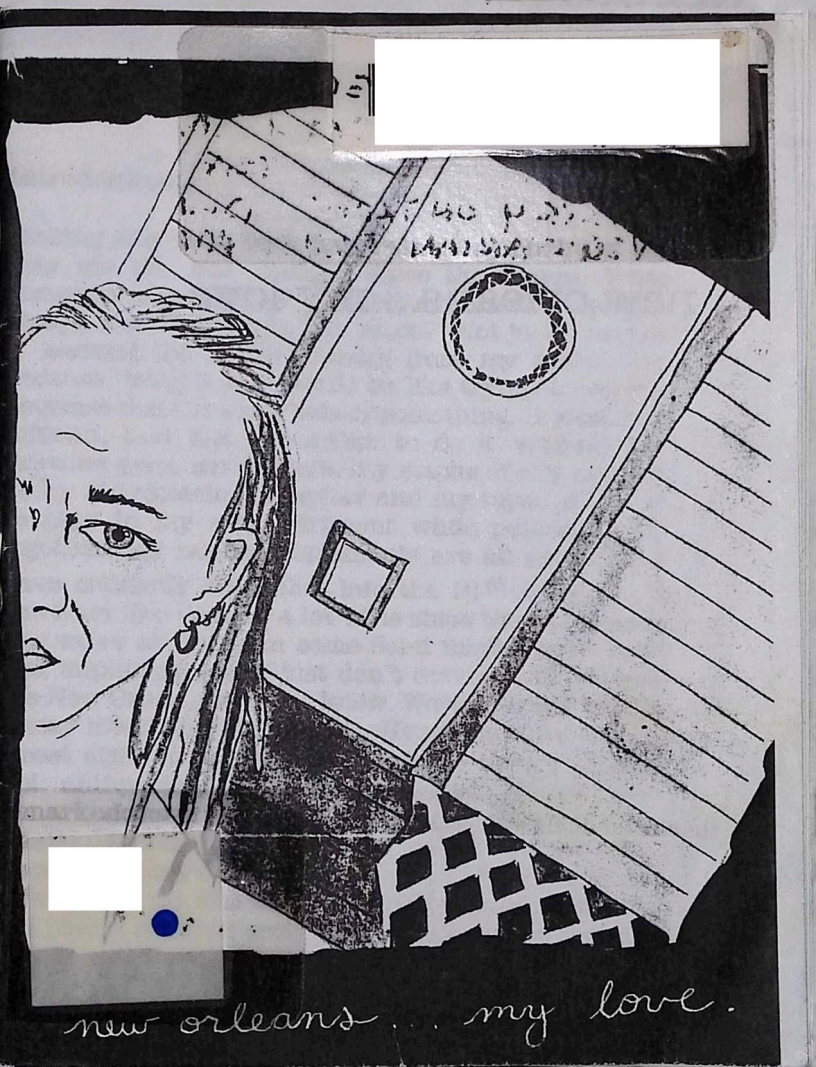

new orleans . . . my love.

new orleans... my love.

for j.
this is your letter...
thanks for doing everything you could to stay in touch.

Introduction.

Making this little book has been so symbolic of the way my life has changed since the storm. When someone asked me if I would ever make another zine, I was like, "Sure, but when?" Not just because it seemed the furthest thing from my mind, but because doing it now would be like trying to cook a gourmet meal in the woods or something. It would be difficult, and feel impossible to do it without my drawing pens, my scissors, my stacks of clip art, my janky old electric typewriter and my tapes of music to play in my old apartment while putting it all together. My normal implements are all gone and I have suddenly been shot into the 21st century. It has been like that for a lot of us since the hurricane, like we're all living in some Sci-fi movie, with tools and implements that just don't seems to fit well in the New Orleans we once knew. We've always been a pretty low tech kind of place. Houses and furniture, street signs and even the highways here look and feel antiquated. So much so that Ethan once remarked how just my phone, my regular little plastic touch tone phone, looked remarkable "modern" in my old house. And now I am here, at the coffee shop, on this little laptop computer, with my cell phone, running around taking photos on my new digital camera. We've been forced to replace things like land lines with cell phones and e mail for real letters, at least until the infrastructure of our city is

rebuilt. I shouldn't complain though. These replacements have helped me to put my thoughts and these images together, and helped me to stay in touch in a place that feels pretty desolate at times. It's a tough world living in a place where the community and social structure I had become so used to are now gone. Where my house and routine are gone. And while statistically things are not "gone", but down by 72 percent (as officially reported by the Times Picayune). Sadly, that 72 percent represents 72 percent less friends, 72 percent less places to find and acquire the things I need to get by, and 72 percent less working stoplights and 72 percent less beautiful trees it seems. 72 percent is a lot when you think about your life. Take 72 percent out and try to get on with things and feel ok - "100 percent" as they say. I guess here none of us feel quite 100 percent. We feel more like 28. Geez.

So, here it is... some attempt at an explanation of what is and was going on. Maybe it is the letter I have neglected to write to anyone in these last months, when putting any words down on paper seemed impossible, if not painful. Hopefully it will help explain for me and for all the others who are here what the hell we have been doing for all this time, and why we are living in a city with no grocery store open after dark, where the trash continues to pile up on the city streets, where many of us are still living with no power as the city winds it was through its bureaucracy trying to make things work again. To explain why I struggled so hard to get back here

when I knew I would be paying more to live here now, in this mess than I ever did before the storm. When the impression the news was giving was that we were living in a toxic city, where we would all catch terrible viruses and die. Why I can't seem to be anywhere but here where all of our year plans are now on hold for who knows how long as we struggle to just get by, to get back to normal and try to keep convincing ourselves that eventually everything will all be "BETTER THAN EVER!", as all the advertising and campaign ads say. It feels so crazy really that sometimes I secretly think of leaving, moving to somewhere functional. But when told Icky that he said "Aw, come on Shelley, where would you go?". He's right. This is the only place I have ever felt ok. Human. I fit here. There is nothing I can do about it. So, when people ask me why I am so adamant about staying here, I have found my self saying with a little anger, humor, or sadness, "Look, I'd rather die young here than get old anywhere else!" When I yelled this to one friend over the loud music playing at a neighborhood bar, he laughed so hard, and told me later that he had taken telling people that. Because in all seriousness, he meant it as much as I did.

evacuation #1 - our girl, katrina.

I had spent the summer on my yearly three month trip to India, the first time I had visited there during hurricane season and I was a little on edge about it the whole time. When Tropical Storm Cindy made her way to and through New Orleans I was in a ten day silent retreat, dreaming of water and fish, water

and waves. Before going in the retreat, I had told my friend Neil that if the storm came and blew my house down not to tell me until I was officially out, and upon my exit, he said to me, without looking up from the dishes he was washing, that it had been bad. New Orleans had taken a big hit. It was only a fraction of a second of the pain and disbelief that I would grow used to when I saw the slight smirk on his face giving away his accidental preparation for what the rest of my summer would hold. It was just barely two weeks after coming home to New Orleans that all of this happened.

I have lived in New Orleans for the better part of the last 10 years, and can say that not a day has gone by that I have not thought or even said out loud how much I love my city. And now, the terrible thing we residents have speculated about every hurricane season finally happened, the "perfect" hurricane hit. The Friday before the storm, I read the paper over coffee and saw that this little storm was coming up through the Gulf towards the Florida panhandle, no big deal. That night, my mom called from Indiana and said there was a hurricane coming our way. She does that a lot so I didn't think much of it until my neighbors called later and said they had reserved some rooms in Jackson, Mississippi for them and any of our friends to take shelter. Still I didn't think much of it, even into the next day that we all spent cleaning the yard of potential flying objects, putting plants inside, boarding up my and the neighbors windows in a great communal effort, all the while listening to the news of this storm worsening. We all planned to meet down the road at midnight, so with

a few hours left, I cleaned and swept my house, still wondering if the evacuation was necessary. We have been through this so many times, and every time, we are back at home in a few days, out a bunch of money spent on an unneeded and unplanned vacation. I cleaned and thought, wondered and doubted, until a jar of green tea fell from my shelf from the kitchen all on its own. When I heard the crash from my front room, my stomach dropped deep. For the first time, the feeling of danger crept in and I thought, "Shit, this I real."

I put three photos, my Buddha statue, my journal, a bag of pet food and a few pairs of unders in my bag. Then, with a few hours left until we were to leave, I painted my toenails red, and lay on my small, dog eaten couch and listened to my two favorite tapes, Drive like Jehu and Dead Moon front to back. At midnight, I grabbed the bag, my dog, my cat, walked out the house, kissed my front door goodbye and went with Daniel and his two dogs to meet up with the others, making us 13 people (including 2 kids and one pregnant woman and one guy on a 3 day vacation from Los Angeles) and 8 dogs. We got in 5 cars and at two in the morning started driving towards Jackson Mississippi. At about 6 am we heard that the hurricane had made category 5 and was still headed straight for the city. It is hard to write that. I can't talk about that time without the tears welling up in me. Thinking about all those moments leading up to now, to the raising wind speeds, to the reports of an unprecedented mandatory evacuation of the city of New Orleans, to evacuating again to Memphis when we heard the

storm would still be a category three when it hit Jackson, to the moment we sat in the park getting ready to all meet Kristen for food and drinks and we heard the worst news yet, that the breach in the levee had gotten so big that plans to repair it had been abandoned. That was the worst of all. When I heard that I sobbed, I sobbed and sobbed.

For those of you who don't know me or others from New Orleans, there are few places that inspire the type of devotion to a city like New Orleans does. It's the kind of place people love to tell stories about. But they are different than tales of other cities. Like the difference between telling stories about some acquaintance and telling stories about a long time lover. They are more close, intimate. New Orleans is where I built my family, my community. I know the city, the people, the neighborhoods, the houses, the smells, the progression of the blooming of the most beautiful plants in the world - gardenias, night blooming jasmine, sweet olive, crepe myrtles, hibiscus, ginger, banana trees, irises. The idea of that place slowly filling with water, like a slowly sinking ship, or like a painful cancer like death, just broke my heart. There was nothing we could do but watch on a television, the water rising (and becoming more toxic) and to watch our community, 100,000 of which didn't have transportation to evacuate with, poor people, already disenfranchised and forgotten people, sinking into the city, as the lake and river poured in. The news couldn't, or didn't know how to report on those people, because the government has never chosen to recognize them. Reporters inadvertently implied that these people

were stupid not to leave, or that we, as a city, were stupid to use or limited resources trying to fix our public schools instead for preparing for such a disaster. People even went as far as to rant on the radio about how these poor New Orleaneans should have had the foresight to not have children if they didn't have the means to care for them or evacuate them from a city in case of a disaster like this. Assholes.

In some ways, I long for words from that time, as offensive or painful as they were, to relive the things and the images that I was seeing and hearing on television. Things to make me cry, feel the feelings I wish I could have felt when instead I was filled with this - not numbness which sounds so cliché - but with this inability to grasp the greatness of it all, the hugeness of what was happening before the eyes of the world. The things we saw on television were these horrid, painful realities that were difficult to get our heads around. But these were *my* stories, of *my* place and *my* people, that when translated into language fit for printing on the cover of the New York Times just didn't seem real enough to be about MY life. It was too unbelievable to grasp, too ridiculous to take seriously, and so real that it couldn't feel anything but unreal.

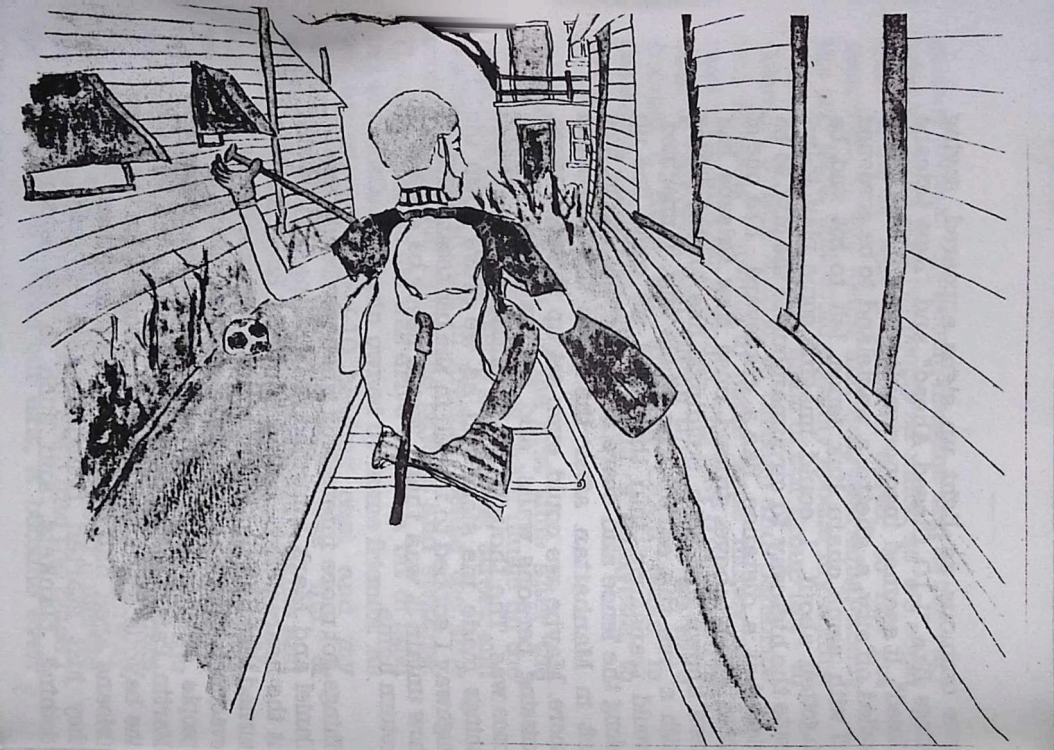
After the news of the levee break we decided to have a meeting, (at the bar) and to decide what to do next. It became clear to us that we all had probably lost everything, and that made staying together seem essential. So we decided almost spontaneously to get a house together in Lafayette because it was

as close to home as we could imagine and at the very least we could help our people as much as we could from there. It was a pact, of sorts, to not get separated. It was sweet and heartwarming, about the only thing that could possibly soothe my aching heart. Still, the next day much of our group left - to Colorado, to New Mexico, to Chicago and California and Montana - vowing to make some money and meet up again after a month. The last 5 of us drove back to Lafayette, and within three days we were donated a small but amazing Cajun cabin in Catahoula, Louisiana, just outside of Lafayette, to live in and to work out of.

Coming into Louisiana for the first time after the hurricane such a relief, hearing Cajun music on the radio, driving into Lafayette and seeing street and business signs written in French, feeling the true southern heat and seeing the bayous and swamps. The first thing we did was drive out to a bit of land in the Atchafalaya Basin owned by some friends. As we turned onto the I-10 heading east and my stomach dropped. The highway was full of emergency and military vehicles, flashing lights and busses of all kinds heading into and out of the city, the city that was mine, my one true love, yet that was totally out of reach to me. It felt as if we were on some lost highway. A highway with an end like the one on the cover of that Shel Silverstein book Where The Sidewalk Ends. In my mind, the highway stopped like that, like a broken off piece of concrete that I could look over and down, deep into the place I once lived. As we neared our exit, it became even

more ominous as light up signs appeared, saying things like "I-10 Closed Ahead" and "New Orleans Closed". It seemed inconceivable to me. It was like a walled off city, a ghetto, a wasteland to be cordoned off with some chain link fence, left to rot and be forgotten about. I could imagine some plan to re-route the highway to circumambulate the city, to be viewed at a distance, like a graveyard - like one of those giant, above ground ones New Orleans has been known for, with buildings, like tombs, poking high above the earth. The whole city, I imagined, would transform into that, and we could line up along the fence and stare at it like that gaping hole left in Manhattan after the mess that happened there. Maybe we could even set up viewing towers, missing persons walls, and sell souvenirs of what once was. The thought, or potential reality, of these things made me sick, and as we drove down the highway I sobbed to myself in the backseat, thinking how unfair it was that I would never be allowed to return home.

Things got more interesting when we got to the land. Daniel and Mark informed us that the big rest stop at the nearest exit, called "Butte la Rose" had been turned into an kind of impromptu welcome center for evacuees. It was started spontaneously by the people of the surrounding parishes, including St. Martin Parish - the same people who went through the bayous by boat to rescue people from the New Orleans area had sending extra things there - when they just started bringing cases of water, extra clothing, blankets, and such to the center. That



evolved into tented areas for hot meals and drop offs of things like 200 pounds of "deer spaghetti" (yup) and humongous pots of red beans and rice by the truckload. The military even donated hundreds of cases of MRE's and the center had become the official first stop for busses of worn out people leaving the Convention Center and Superdome. People that had unbelievably been waiting to get out of the city since that day we evacuated. So many days. It was the first stop on the way to wherever all of the people and families would eventually be shipped off to. And while it was a terrible situation for everyone coming out on those busses, it seemed like a dream come true for us. We desperately needed something to do, to at least temporarily take the focus off ourselves and out complete sense of lostness and decided to stay and volunteer there as much as we could.

For about two days we were there a lot. The busses were sparse, but now and then 10 would show up at one time and people would wander off them dazed. They were given bags of toothbrushes and soap, toilets, clothing, hot meals, Gatorade and hugs and affection. Babies were taken to a changing station to be washed and lotioned and re-dressed in fresh clothing. Old people stayed on the busses mostly because they were so frail, so we lined up and walked them plates of food and ice cold drinks to cool them off in the 95 degree evening heat. There were people who were shoeless and others in evening dresses with high heels. There were whole families and others who seemed like they hadn't been around

other people in a really long time. The people were dirty, smelled bad, and looked terribly worn out. But honestly, each and every person was full of love and full of appreciation. There were thank-you's and god-bless-you's to be found from every person. There was excitement in the kids and real gratefulness in every adult. These were not the "animals" spoken of on the news. They were humans who had been through a total hell and yet were still so, so, so appreciative. There was no grumbling, no fighting, no yelling, not even the slightest harsh word spoken, smashing the rumors of these people running around the streets of the city taking advantage of the situation or of each other. If these were those people, they were the shells of them left over after felling totally and completely abandoned by the government and by humanity.

The people there did talk though. The adults told quiet, sad tales while the kids ran around looking for cute clothes in the piles of giveaways. The locals, a bunch of loud talking, sweet Cajuns were there to listen and to help. One young boy, maybe 12 years old told me about a boy from New Orleans about his age who he had been helping out, trying to find him a pair of shoes to wear after coming off the bus barefoot. He proudly told me how he took his own shoes off to give the kid, and about how it made him think about how much he had when these people had nothing left at all. I asked on pretty blonde college girl from Lafayette if she had heard any interesting stories from the people she had had contact with. She told me wide eyed and quietly that a woman told her she had walked for hours and hours through the

flood water with her toddler and little infant until it had just become too much for her to do. The woman knew she would only make it if she left one of the children behind and said she set the baby down on top of a garbage can and just walked away. Really, this girl told me that. It was just amazing, all the stories were true and worse than you could imagine, there were more than I could even get my head around. I wondered when anyone would ever hear them and when the country would ever realize what we had let happen right here, under our privileged little white noses.

When, after a those couple days, the busses stopped arriving, the Welcome Center closed down. I started spending most of my time between the cabin and town, trying to keep busy, to keep in touch and to try to contact people I had lost track of. The Lafayette public library set up a special room just for folks from New Orleans refugees (at what point did we actually evolve from evacuees to refugees? When it was projected that we could perhaps not return home for months, or even *years*?), with about 50 computers, free coffee and cookies, information on applying to FEMA, how to get food stamps and other kinds of assistance. There were even free long distance phone calls and temporary library cards. It was there that I sat for as long as I could take it, checking e-mails from friends, reading lists of people I knew and didn't with information about where they were, or whether they were lost. One guy from New York called Joe Tuba, who I must have known somehow, compiled a list of literally like every person I had ever met in New Orleans. It was truly

> - Mathew Rosenbeck (ok-out) (via Mysq
> - matt (now in asheville) (ok-out) (via T
> - Matt (W/ Drew) in either Memphis or A
> - Matt Gaumer and his parents Doctor &
> - Alabama (Spike Perkins and Hatty via My
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> - Orum, but Shirley Jackson says she saw F
> - In the Quarter
> - matt Knowles of nowe miasto (ok-out) (vi
> - Matt Penno (W/ Debbie Davis, Ben & Bow
> - Matt Moody (not out of new orleans) (ok-c
> - Matt Sweet (no info)
> - MAXX Slater and Bea (ok-out) (via Mysqlun)
> - mayda Hebendal (W/ Caleb) (western Illois
> - Megan Hebendal (W/ Caleb) (ok-out) (via T.
> - melissa breed, from superior headquar
> - (via Ethan Clark))
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> - Michael White safe in Houston ,
> - Michelle (W/ brother clif) wr
> - Michelle Baker (no info)
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> - (via Kathleen K)
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> - Nowe Miasto adds (ok-out) (John Gerke
> - Nowles, Thea Patterson, misha hall, kelly,
> - were at andy allen's parents house in southin
> - Okra P. Dingle (W/ Jane Lennon??) (missing- i
> - Olivia (W/ Jay Pennington) (ok-out) (via Tanya
> - Omar in Texas (via rollergrall from nola.com for

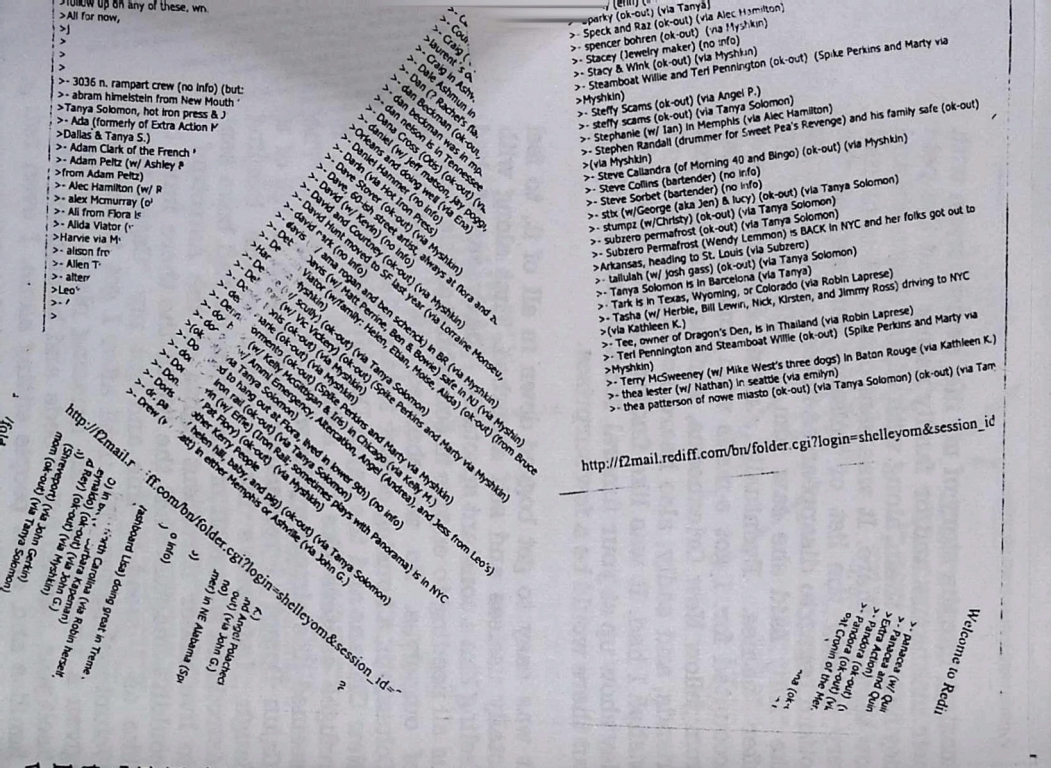
> - Rose's mom (w/ Amy Hood) in Shreveport (via John Gerkin)
> - Rosemary (ok-out) (via Mysqlun)
> - Rosemary Burton (lived next door to Oz bar & their illegal bed & breakfast ... (no info)
> - Royce Burton (lived next door to Oz bar & their illegal bed & breakfast ... (no info)
> - put up big signs protesting the Vieux Carr Commission & getting away with it. ...)
> - Ryan (W/ Kimberly the Vieux Carr Commission & getting away with it. ...) (via Mysqlun)
> - circumstances involving the Vieux Carr Commission & getting away with it. ...
> - Ryan (W/ Adam Pettz)
> - Ryan (W/ Adam Pettz)
> - Ryan and Dreher (ok-out) (via Angel P.)
> - (via email from Adam Pettz) (via Angel P.)
> - Ryan (W/ Clare) in Austin (via Mysqlun)
> - Ryan Donahou (ok-out) (via Mysqlun)
> - Ryan Donahou (ok-out and Chris) en route to Houston. (via Angel P.)
> - Sabrina (W/ Lorrell) (no info) (ok-out) (via Tanya Solomon)
> - Sabrina (W/ Lorrell) (no info) (ok-out) (via Tanya Solomon)
> - sandi and Ivanna (W/ Chad Hol) (ok-out) (via Tanya Solomon)
> - Sarah Peterson (W/ Kathleen Kraus)
> - Satan John (ok-out) (via Tanya Solomon)
> - satan john (ok-out) (via Tanya Solomon) (no info)
> - Scott Bannon (ex-Circus Amb; lived on St. Roche) is safe (via Ben Meyers)
> - Scotty Hamilton (ok-out) (via Mysqlun)
> - Scotty (Deirdre) (ok-out) (via Rollerpatti from nola com forum)
> - scully Connor (ok-out) (via Tanya Solomon)
> - Sean Cummings (via Tanya Solomon)
> - Sebastian from Smitty's in Texas (via Ben Meyers)
> - Sebastian (via hot Iron Press)
> - Shana Griffin (via hot Iron Press)
> - shana griffin of new miasto (ok-out) (via Tanya Solomon)
> - shana griffin of new miasto (ok-out) (via Tanya Solomon)
> - Shane Sasson (ok-out) (via Mysqlun)
> - shanna oneth, laura chet, and kids went to central Louisiana (via John Gerkin)
> - Shanna Sasson (ok-out) (via Angel P.)
> - shanna oneth, laura chet, and kids went to central Louisiana (via John Gerkin)
> - Shannon Bentman (ok-out) (via Mysqlun)
> - shannon Bentman (ok-out) (via Tanya Solomon)
> - Shannon Bentman (aka, shelley on rainbreaker) (via John Gerkin)
> - Shelley Jackson (ok-out) (via Tanya Solomon)
> - shelley (rainbreaker (new?)) in Texas I believe I have had 2nd hand
> - shelley rainbreaker and her boyfriend ... ester and other friends (Spike Perkins and

Ladies (ok-out) (via K
Tasha, Nick, Kris

> - Annie Adams (w/ Elaine Adams, Emma Emergency, Alexandra, and Jess from
> - army moon and going to Austin (Shreveport) (via John Gerkin)
> - Arthur Adams (w/ Elaine Adams, returning to NOLA w/ puppies (via Mysqlun)
> - Andrea Carbine (w/ Jason) (ok-out) (via Tanya Solomon

amazing, like the story of my life, every person with their nicknames and/or family names and the pets they had with them, along with where they went and how they got there. It was sent out to all of us and very quickly the list of "missing persons" at the bottom began to disappear as notes that said things like "Amy said she saw him on CNN" showed up after names. Eventually, most everyone was accounted for. I got e-mails with constant updates from fellow New Orleaneans, e-mails from long lost friends, and sadly, also heard nothing others who I wished I had. It was like finding out who would one day show up at your funeral. Most would be obvious, but there would be a few surprises.

It was easy to get bogged down in all of it, to feel totally useless and self absorbed. That along with feeling like a constant spectacle, "the evacuees", had us all needing to engage in something a little outside of ourselves. So we checked out Blackham's Colussium, a housing center for about 400 pets from New Orleans and the Cajun Dome, one of those giant refugee centers like the Astrodome in Houston. It seemed like almost a joke when we heard of it. "The *Cajun* Dome?" I remember saying with a bit of a laugh. Lafayette's little version of the looming Astrodome where all of our residents had been sent to live under florescent lights on the Astroturf. I couldn't imagine what the life in the there must be like as I stood in line and got my "Cajun Dome Volunteer" picture ID, until after I got it and was given a tour. It was an amazing place. The dome itself was packed full of beds and belongings, whole families and quiet people sitting alone. I even ran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into neighbors and even some weirdoes whose bikes I have been fixing in the French quarter for the last 5 years. A lunch line was set up in the rear of the place, and there were other snack bars and cold drink counters set up around the area. Outside of the dome were lots of smaller rooms and other arenas, also jam packed with people, free clothing areas, hallways with strong tattooed men giving haircuts to kids and old men next to radios blaring good hip hop. There were medical areas and counseling areas, FEMA booths and Red Cross lines, places to get first aid and toiletries, and a mini, portable post office. There were even basketball courts full of boys and huge New Orleans Bounce music playing loud from giant speakers in courtyard between buildings where everyone would gather in the evening to dance and flirt and smoke cigarettes. Daniel and I stood there teary eyed at the sight of it. It was a beautiful scene, one only to be found in a refugee center full of New Orleaneans for sure.

The place was like a mini-city really, but more than once I heard it compared to more of a mini-prison. One required a badge, either volunteer or resident, to enter, and had to stand in line to pass through metal detectors and to have your bag searched my armed police behind a table. Often times the guards, and sadly the some of the volunteers were less than pleasant, and I heard constant comments from the residents about why "they should just go the fuck home if they don't want to be here." Tensions were running high on all sides, and there was little to be done with so many resources stretched thin. The place would bring me to tears. Either from being

snapped at from other volunteers, or just because of the oppressiveness of the situation, the constant negotiation, the constant announcements. Fluorescent lighting and overcooked food. It was like being in the atmosphere of an emergency waiting room for hours and days on end. I was put to work doing things like serving lunch, collecting dirty laundry, babysitting huge groups of children. And though the work itself felt good, I think I left there crying every time, feeling bad because I couldn't help more, but knowing I was just feeling too fragile to be present and helpful to anyone. After awhile, I just stopped going, and began spending a lot of time out at the cabin, trying to write and listening to the radio obsessively, getting angry, crying sentimentally at the New Orleans music shows.

In all, we stayed in Lafayette for a little less than a month. In some ways, I think we all thought we were actually moving there. New Orleans was still full of water and the Army Corps of Engineers seemed to think it would take months to drain it all and in fact, couldn't decide it would go when they did it. To the disappointment of so many folks who had worked for years to get Lake Ponchatrain clean, it was finally decided that the stanky, polluted waters would be drained there, and miraculously, the city was dry in a matter of weeks. We were shocked, and so happy that for the first time *ever* something had happened ahead of schedule in our city. When it was announced that people would be allowed to enter the outlying parish to collect their things, we jumped at the opportunity to go home. Really, it went from inconceivable that we would ever be back in New

Orleans, to us driving to the city in just a matter of days. And when on the second visit in, it was my turn to go I was totally beside myself with excitement.

coming home.

We got up at about five am, loaded the car with water and food, gloves and respirators and started the three hour drive back to New Orleans. Driving the back roads towards the city and seeing the swamps up close was the first evidence of what was to come. As we got closer it became apparent that the damage was extensive. The trees became thinner and thinner, all the cypress trees topped and snapped, fallen over into the swamp muck. The swamp water had risen so much that there were houses in the middle of it now, roofless and falling down houses and others that seemed untouched, just sitting there surrounded by water. The places where the water had receded were replaced with the most potent smell of rot and decay, a distinct smell that was difficult to describe, yet possible to top, as I would soon find out when I got into my home. It was an organic, yet almost metallic smell that I swear I will never forget. It was the introduction to what would become my new life for the next few weeks.

As we approached New Orleans, we found its edges we cordoned off with military and cops at every possible entrance. There were lines of trucks and emergency vehicles waiting to get in and we were all nervous that we wouldn't be allowed in. But we

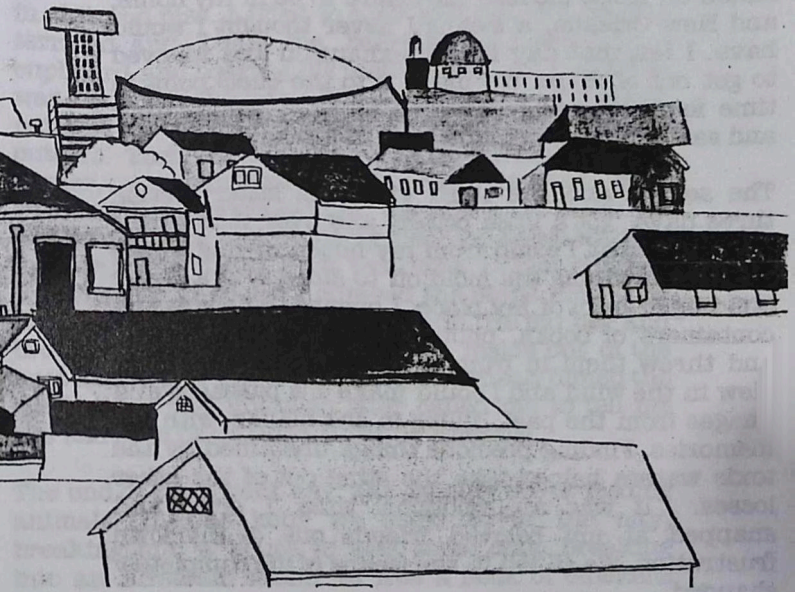
were, with some bogus company documents printed off the computer in a way that looked so janky I still can't believe they worked. So we got to survey the city a bit while it was still a ghost town, occupied only by military, police, and sleazy developers in convertibles driving escorted around the city in search of property investments. Not a bit of cleanup had begun and there were still signs of the abandonment, the rescues and the destruction everywhere. We tried our best to decipher the markings on the houses that indicated when and if the place had been searched and how many people were found, live or dead.There were still trees and roofing material blocking the roads, boats scattered on every corner, and power lines down everywhere, poles leaning precariously over homes. It was an unbelievable amount of destruction, and even more unbelievable to see a city of that size completely empty.

That first day in felt crazy, frantic really, trying to survey all the damage in the short time we were allowed there before the 6 pm curfew. Each person I had come in with had houses to check on, work to be done and things to find, and I felt antsy to get to my own. When we finally approached my house, I felt like I was nearly running, from the house to the yard, with a bandana around my face, trying to decide what to do first - find out how many chickens are left, raid what was left of my kitchen for food to feed them, find water to give them, check Effie and Don's house, get Mark's passport, open up all the window's to air things out, find my drill. The yard

mine and branches from our huge pecan tree, that it was difficult to make it through. The waterlines showed that the yard had gotten nearly six to seven feet in some places, amazing to imagine. Walking into my home that I had only gotten reports on from Daniel and Wink's visit (when they snuck in by bicycle and canoe to rescue Wink's cat while the city was still so wet, they had to canoe through the neighborhoods and parks to get there) was a dark moment, one I can only remember if I close my eyes and visualize that first look. They told me that my house had gotten about three feet of water inside. In my mind it didn't seem like much until I saw the state of that water, and smelled it myself. It was the "toxic soup" that we had always heard of in ominous shows about what damage a big hurricane could do to our city and how eventually, someday, one would come and wreck our lives. Truly, water, though soft and gentle, can do amazingly destructive things. It overturns shelves laden with books, rearranges furniture and soaks papers and photos into soggy, mushy, moldy, unsalvageable masses. It rusts and tarnishes metal, bleaches fabrics and turns everything into hazardous waste.

I didn't think losing so many things would really affect me as much as it did. I'm a Buddhist. I'm meant to understand the reasons to remain unattached to things, and to objects. Instead, I have been an avid collector of junk and memories, photos of years and years past, and have never thrown away a single letter received in my whole life. Really. I kept them stored away in the metal containers I had also loved to collect and needless to

waste deep poo water to look for cats that ran off

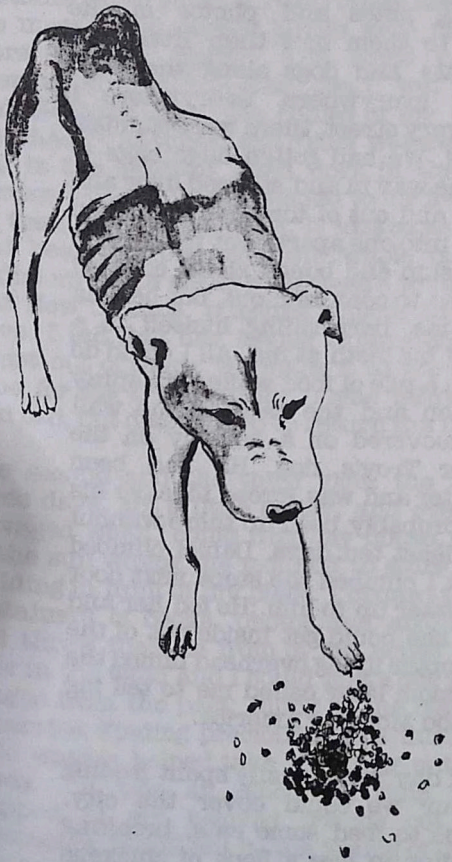


say, neither fared well after sitting in that water for nearly three weeks. I don't think I will ever be able to stomach the smell of rusty metal again. Surveying the mess in 95 degree humid heat made it all the more intense, potent. The smell of death was everywhere, dead plants, dead, wet banana trees and elephant ears, the bodies of my poor chickens who hadn't survived the rising waters. Death. Dead rat in the bathtub, dead dogs in the street, dead garden I had built and tended to for five years, dead fig tree, dead pecan trees. It looked as if an ashtray had been dumped over the whole place. All of it added up made me lose the desire to be in my home, and New Orleans, a feeling I never thought I would have. I left that day feeling exhausted and relieved to get out of there. We made it to the checkpoint in time for the 6 pm curfew. I was filthy feeling toxic and sad, but determined to return the next day.

The second and the third visit, the latter lasting three days, got a little better, and over that time I salvaged what I could from my house, drying things in the sun wiping the mold off to store it in a dryer building in front of my place. I opened the boxes and containers of books, photos and about 300 letters and threw them in from of my house to dry. They blew in the wind and I could make out passages and images from the past, filling in the blanks with my memories. Finding precious things unstained by the toxic waters helped take the sting out of the other losses. It was an emotional time. I cried and snapped at my beloved friends out of my own frustration. We all felt it, the feeling of life completely changed.

During these visits, we drove to the homes of so many friends, taking notes and photos of the waterlines to report to them how their lives had fared, and feeding cats and dogs along the way. There were animals everywhere. Everywhere I went, every corner, every street, there were animals wandering and hiding. We had gotten huge bags of cat and dog food on the way in and stopped over and over all the way into and out of town feeding them. Susan and John went into one apartment to find this poor thin Pitbul, just skin and bones, alone, covered in shit and piss. I tried to coax him out, but he was terrified and fought me, barricading himself in a cupboard and bearing his teeth at me. All I could do was cry and leave him a pile of food while john spray painted his description and the date on the wall outside. Then we discovered on a balcony on the corner, our neighbor Troy's dog. He had been evacuated by helicopter and was forced to leave his dog behind. She had probably been up there without food or water for at least ten days. Daniel climbed the fence up to it and I climbed the steps next door and threw food and water up to him. He fed her and broke the door in so she could get inside out of the heat and sun. A helicopter flying overhead filmed the whole thing and my mom later called me to tell me she had seen us on Good Morning America.

The end of each work day was usually spent feeding animals. In one hour we could cover the city, breaking into a house to feed some cats, breaking into an Airsteam trailer to free a flock of chickens left there for shelter from the storm, wading through



just before my friends evacuated. It all happened so fast. The city was so empty we could make it from one end to another in 10 minutes it seemed, debris and mud and hundreds of washed out cars lining the streets were are only impediments. Doing this, we saw almost the whole the city, minus the sunken towns of the Lower Ninth and Saint Bernard Parish, flying through stop lights and dodging debris. Some places looked like nothing had happened. Other buildings lost walls or were cracked in half by trees that had fallen over in the soaked earth. Every house, it seemed, had flooded, with rusty colored waterlines staining the exteriors. Most of those lines represented water at a depth that would easily had covered our vehicles. It was still, still, difficult to grasp just how much water had entered the city.

I drove with John to his house to salvage what he could of his stuff and that of his two housemates who were picking apples in New Hampshire. His house was incredibly smelly, incredibly moldy and still wet. We joked how his house won the prize for total funkiness and talked for days about the frothing mold pile in his kitchen that seemed to grow before our weary eyes. Passing the bayou in my neighborhood, we saw what had obviously been a last stand for many resident who had refused to leave. It was littered with boats, tables and chairs where people had probably sat for days waiting for rescue. There were signs pleading for help and a feeling of abandonment that still hung in the air. It wasn't until months later when a friend had an art show on that very spot where he hung photos of the flood on posts in the ground so one could look at each

view as a before and after, that I realized just how deep the water had been there.

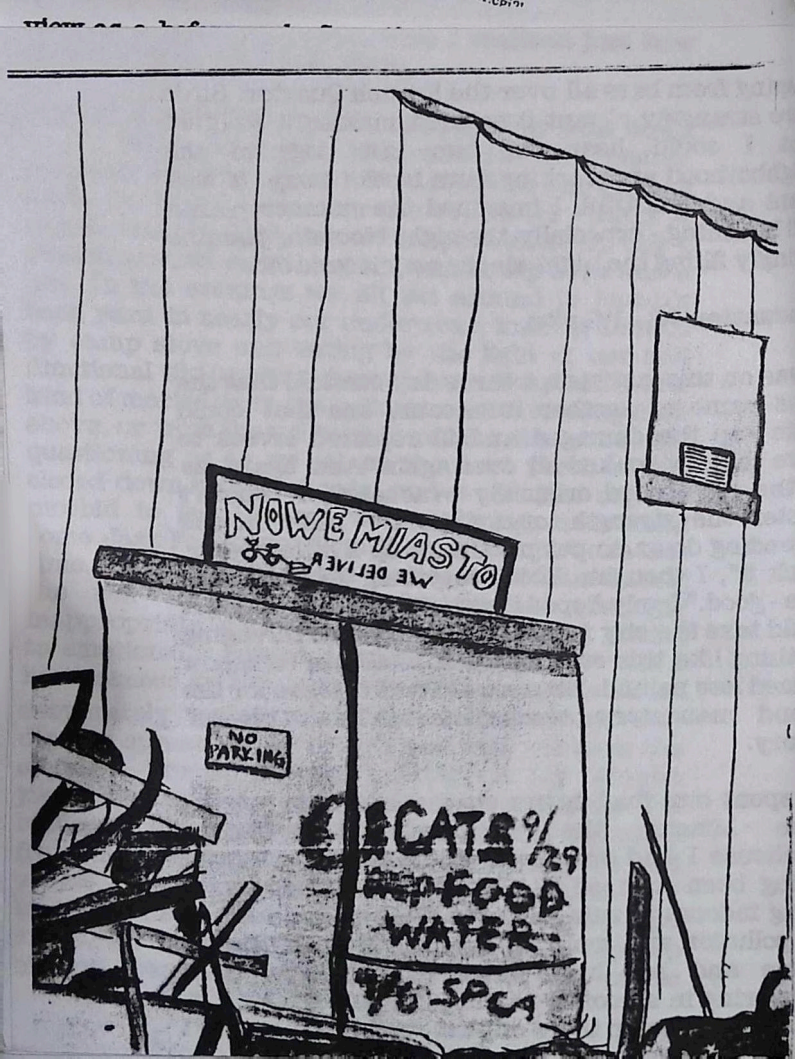
Through all of this, the sun continued to beat down on us, with 95 degree temperatures and deadly humidity bringing an added intensity to our days of work. It didn't rain after the storm for nearly a month, and the heat was truly oppressive. By day I walked around in nothing but shorts, flip flops and a bra. In the evenings we all sat around in Susan's back yard in nearly our underwear, making dinners by camp stove and eating by the light of her still functional tiki torches. It must have looked silly and kind of morbid from the helicopters still circling from above, or from the military Hummers that drove by, questioning us as we sat on the front porch of this closed down neighborhoods. And it was just slightly morbid to feel like we were re-living, re-creating some Jazz Fest party from the past for just one last time. It was like the beach parties in Vietnam during the war - having some fun seemed glaringly inappropriate, yet so essential to keep from getting to emotionally bogged down in it all. There was a restlessness to the evenings shut up in the house desperately trying to dodge the now even more disease spreading the mosquitoes with not even the slightest breeze blowing, making us lay around joking and laughing about how we could make the blades on those ceiling fans turn to give us any relief from the stagnant heat. But the moonrise, full and yellow over the silent city made it feel worth it. I tried to imagine the lost sounds, the Caliope's pipe organ, the train whistle in the Bywater, the hip hop blaring from cars and the sounds of the music

eeping from bars all over the French Quarter. Birds ere strangely s'lent it seemed, making it so quiet at I could hear the two lost dogs in the eighborhood approaching from blocks away. It was lent and beautiful. I imagined the summer plants ill blooming - especially the night blooming jasmine vingly filling the night air the way it once did.

vacuation #2 - li'l rita.

was on this last visit, a three day stretch, that the ews came of another hurricane, one that could gain top the damaged and ill repaired levees to ave the city soaked all over again. And, again, as the day I had originally evacuated, I couldn't uster the strength, or maybe the belief in the pending doom, to put my things up a little higher. 'uck it", I thought, "If it everything gets wet this me - good." I only hoped that if it happened again, it ould take the city for good, and spare me salvaging ything like this ever again. A total loss somehow emed less painful. We were ordered to leave for the cond mandatory evacuation in New Orleans' story.

e spent our final hours on the last day tarping owe Miasto, the just-purchased collective arehouse I had once lived in, its roofing material ving been torn off in the storm leaving a rain ling indoors to ruin what the flood waters hadn't. he pollution and mold in the air had finally gotten me and my lungs hurt so bad that even mmering in a roofing nail felt like torture. Still, it as amazing be up there on that roof. One, because I


NOWE MIASTO
NO PARKING
CATS 9/29
FOOD
WATER
SPCA

...RAILWAYS ARE PROHIBITED ON COMMERCIAL...

was so proud and happy that these friends I had evacuated with would take the time to work on a building that there only connection to was that I had once lived there. And two, because the view from that roof was totally stunning, totally apocalyptic. It stood three stories above ground and looked over the city's downtown, giving a spectacular view of the ruined Superdome. I had sat up there many, many times in the past and drawn that cityscape, and now here I was looking over the ruins of it, trees fallen down roofs torn off, washed out cars lining every street and neutral ground. It made me think the end days were near, looking up at that city, empty of life, and the sky buzzing with military and news helicopters. It brought me back to September 11th and the no-fly zones above our cities. It brought me back to a week I had spent in Katmandu in the days after their royal family had been massacred and the streets and skies were cleared and Matt and I looked over the empty city to see smoke from protest bombs going off n the distance. I never thought I would witness so much mass destruction, tragedy, and political insanity in my whole life, let alone in the span of a few years. It really felt like the world might just end there on that roof, and we would be standing up there, watching it as the final remnants burned.

staying.

We waited through Rita in Lafayette, ignoring the call for an evacuation there, and the day after that hurricane passed we went right back to New

Orleans. The plan was again to stay for three days. I left my dog Maggie back in Lafayette and Daniel and I got a ride in with Cassandra to try to salvage my truck. It had sat in about three feet of water, but still looked like it could be brought back to life. In retrospect, it seems a silly idea, but at the time, it seemed all I had left, something I could use to help rebuild a new life. We stayed in town for those days, eating MRE's and driving in and out of the checkpoints with fake LASPCA signs on the vehicles we borrowed to get parts from the only auto parts store open out in the unflooded suburbs. We got a lot of work done, but when the day came around to catch our ride back to Lafayette, I just couldn't do it. I cried and worried about how and when I could get back to New Orleans, or how I could get Maggie here with me, or how I never wanted to leave the city again. I cried about everything until Daniel had had enough and said to me, "Ok Shelley, this is how it's gonna go." and mapped out a plan for him to get back to Lafayette, get our dogs and the things I would need to stay in New Orleans and to return as soon as possible. And he did that while I stayed back, working on my truck by day, and living with Susan and Cassandra in a posh, but trashed old hotel in the French Quarter. The owner, our friend Bobby, had stayed through the whole hurricane, letting stranded tourists and residents stay there after the storm. Now, he let us live there and we helped him get the place back in order.

After so much work, my truck was finally running and I had some autonomy, some time to do things on my own. So I would drive around during the day,

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MENU NO. 12
VEGGIE BURGER IN BBQ SAUCE

AmeriQual Packaging Evansville, IN 47710

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FLAMELESS RATION HEATERS ARE PROHIBITED ON COMMERCIAL AIRLINES UNLESS SEALED IN ORIGINAL MRE MENU BAG

Peelable Seal

Meal
Ready-to-Eat Vegetarian Individual
MENU NO. 12
VEGGIE BURGER IN BBQ SAUCE
AmeriQual Packaging Evansville, IN 47710
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working on clearing the rest of my house, checking on friends' houses, touring the neighborhoods that were open, and mostly feeding as many animals as I could. I would drive through the empty streets at lightning speed taking advantage of feeling like I owned the city. (Daniel was actually pulled over in my truck by some out of state trooper who said, "I was looking for a blond girl in a little blue truck, she's been flying through stoplights all over the place!") Back in my neighborhood, I had taken to breaking onto houses where I would see or hear animals that had yet to be picked up by animal rescue, to give them food, water and much needed affection. It was weird, being those houses, left just as they had been, obvious that each person thought they would be gone only for a matter of days. Stranger still to have no idea when any of them would be allowed to return. To think that those places could sit there like that forever.

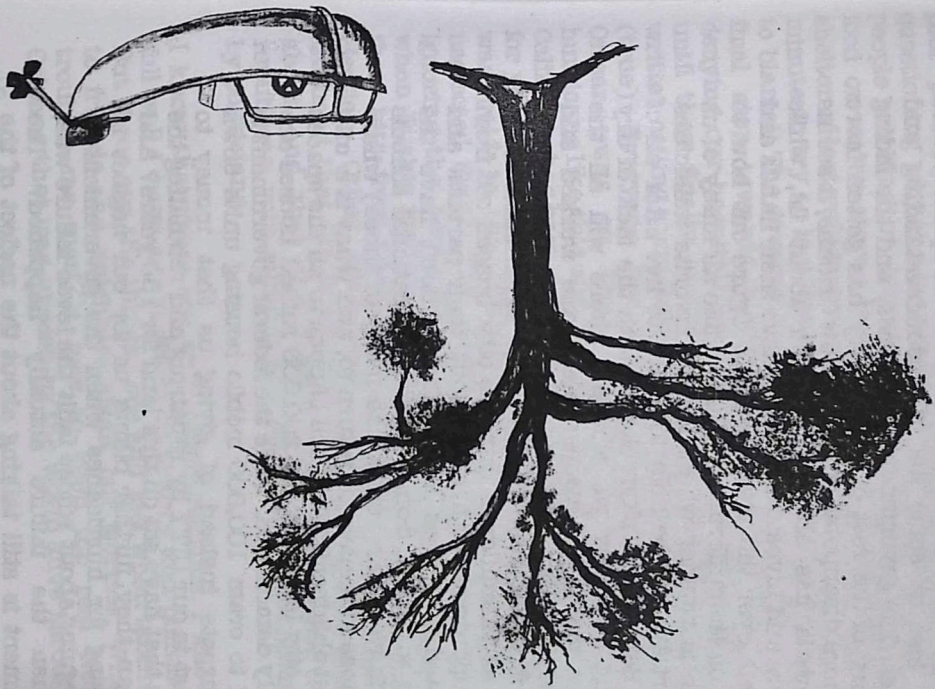
In the evenings me, Susan and Cassandra would walk around the French Quarter, sit in the darkened Jackson Square, visit Molly's at the Market - that bar that never did close - to listen to stories from folks who had stayed through the storm and flood. One night I was mesmerized by a friends tale of being the nurse in charge of the 7th floor of Charity Hospital, caring for patients for a week in the dark with no resources as the situation outside got more and more dire. She told us, in tears, about losing patients on the roof of the neighboring Tulane Hospital when the doctors commandeered their helicopter to evacuate themselves instead of the

patients that had been brought two blocks and up flights of stairs to the roof while clinging to life. And, she jokingly told me of her husband sneaking in all the way from Baton Rouge to bring her some comfort, and how, when she opened the cooler full of water and snicker bars that he had brought her, all she could do was snap at him, "You didn't bring batteries!". Her stories were absolutely amazing. I felt like I had tunnel vision as she spoke, I was so consumed in what she was saying. Her words were so clear and real in such a strange sitting, this bar, full of man looking women up and down, full of people drinking excessively and yelling every word at the top of their lungs. Her words had a weight, that even when spoken in a whisper, would have drowned out every conversation in that bar. And they did.

These days and nights were beautiful and long, leisurely and emotionally trying. Time took on a new feeling as we spent so much time negotiating rides and work, food, dinner, how we would all try to meet up and see each other each day. It was excruciating and sweet, and some of the most special times of my life, watching the city slowly and painfully begin to refill and come back to life.

the big evil picture.

This is all personal stuff though that seems miniscule in comparison to the bigger picture. The picture that even today, months after that storm and flood hit our city, seems to get bigger and bigger. When I think about it, the way this mess is going to affect my city, my home, to the way it will affect the



country, it just makes my head feel all spinney, like I get lost in some fog of misunderstanding and worries. The government's response, and the fading memory of the rest of the country has gotten more and more disappointing. From New Orleans, it seems the media has all but forgotten about us, while realtors and investors already have their hands and eyes all over the city, trying to figure out how to profit on the suffering of others while all many of us can do is wonder where all my favorite musicians and artists will be able to afford to live after all of this? Rents have skyrocketed with the lack of dry housing and now we wonder, where will all the renters go? - the people who have worked and studied hard to maintain the culture that people come from all over the world to experience. What about all the children from the city, bussed out from the Superdome with or without their parents and relocated to places their families don't have the means to return from? Without operational schools (though we never really had many of those) where will those kids have to return to, and what is a city without children? What will happen to all the spaces in the city left after the 200,000 ruined houses are actually demolished, while the federal government is trying to cram 100,000 mobile housing units down our throats instead of giving us that money to reinvest in our CITY by repairing and rebuilding the homes that have sat on this land for 150 years? And how can they further blame us for our neglect in preparing for hurricanes when the government is still arguing about whose fault the levee failure was, or when the failure actually happened? The government is still talking about the neglect of the

levee system as if it were a problem to blame on the poor people of the city while only just recently questioning why the mayor had a total of only three people working on hurricane preparation, and no food or water stored in the Superdome, the city's shelter of last refuge, calling the hospitals at the last minute to try to loot them of supplies. Who really is to blame? The government for neglecting to take the final step towards a proper levee system? For denying our hospitals back-up generators for years until they finally arrived only after a grant was written calling them "terrorism preparedness tools"? (true) Everyone has always known that New Orleans was on track to get decimated by a hurricane like this one, and still nobody gave a fuck. California has been retrofitting buildings and bridges for years for fear of the "Big One", yet no attention was paid to the impending doom of the already neglected South. The federal government has been ignoring the South for years, at least until 2004 when Bushie made an appearance in Florida, after their hits from multiple storms, that won him the election. Other than that it has always been assumed that the South was to poor to give a shit about and that the racism there guaranteed a republican vote without any effort or campaigning by politicians.

I know that these are only generalizations. I know full well I have a thin grasp on history and politics. But these are the things I see and feel when talking to friends and neighbors about our worries. What troubles me most is how to keep the real New Orleans that was unseen by the world alive through

all of this. Though tourists come to visit and walk around the French Quarter, the real New Orleans is hidden behind borders that hotels and tourists maps warned not to cross. It brings the fear in me, that these places, their people, and their stories will be brushed under the rug, forgotten forever with the city I know and love for its beauty, faults and eccentricities.

The city is going to change. There is no doubt about that. But I want to make sure that the events that lead up to that change and that the way the city was before is never forgotten. I want everyone to remember, if only just a little, what this city went through, the way we were abandoned and then neglected, and the hard work we are doing to bring our home back. I know that for what I saw in those first days of my return, for the ways I desensitized myself to moving dead animals out of the road and to seeing my favorite homes and neighborhoods destroyed, I will approach celebrations, reuniting and our small victories with the teaspoon of sadness that celebrators in this city have always saved as a way to remember the dead and the their people's history. I want the world to remember that my city was left to drown with tens of thousands of its people, with thousands of animals, and with an amazing culture that can't be found anywhere else in the world.

9-6-05
I LIVE

starting over, kinda.

It has been a rough time trying to get back to a normal life. Part of it is because we are still in the middle of a major clean up, and because there are far fewer people in town than before. Huge parts of the city are still dark and desolate. And, because it's been quite a dude party going on with all of these out of town contractors, construction guys, FEMA dudes, army corps men, military boys making it no fun on my desolate bike ride from the home I have been staying in to like, anywhere in the city. The part of the city I have been staying in is still only partially lit, and the hell far away from anything fully populated or totally lit up. The streets are more full of potholes than ever and the trash, tree limbs and house guts are spilling out into the street more every day. Its totally hazardous and crazy on these half-lit, lamp busted streets. There are days it has me feeling like I should just give up, questioning if the struggle to be back in this desolate town is really worth it.

It'll be different once I move. I am going back to the neighborhood I once lived in here, like 8 years ago - the Bywater. It was once a poor neighborhood affordable to artists and musicians, a weird mixture of poor black families and young girls in striped tights, and waify boys in vests and fedoras riding single speed bikes. Now it has become one of the strongholds of the city, one of the few parts that was not flooded where things look relatively like they did before the storm. Because of that, rentals and homes are a hot commodity and are getting snatched up

faster than they become available. And most places are expensive, out of reach to a lot of this neighborhoods old residents. It has been like a high speed gentrification right before our storm weary eyes. It is funny to be back here under such conditions. I felt like years ago I had graduated from this neighborhood and moved to a more adult part of town where waking up for coffee happens before 2 pm. I keep riding around here, joking with my friend about "getting Bywater", wearing the new torn up leopard print coat my friend facetiously gave me for my birthday so I could "fit in" to my new hood. It seemed strange in some ways, to move back in time like this. But in other ways I look at it as an evolution, forced as it was. It has given me the chance to do different things, spend my time differently, and to look at the city through new eyes. Surprisingly, it feels ok, a little more under control. I even realized actually that I haven't just burst into tears for no reason at all in awhile now.

It seemed for months I cried every day. I cried for the loss of the city, I cried for the loss of my home, and I cried when things started getting back to normal and the specialness of this time started to fade away. It seemed that there was a new reason to cry every day. Of course the morning news still makes me cry, I always has. Any talk of rebuilding or reading the stories of "Katrina Lives Lost" in the newspaper makes me cry too. There is just so much news to catch up with, to try to make sense of, hundreds of fights to fight, so many places to put one's energy or anger. It is just crazy what this city has been through.

now.

It is now February and the effects of this hurricane still are inescapable. There is evidence of it on every corner and on the faces of people who are just now returning home. I think about the hurricane and its aftermath constantly, feel totally obsessed by it. Visiting a friend just yesterday and looking at some photographs from that time, I got to yelling a little, "I am just not over this, you know!" And I am not. On the surface, it seems sometimes like everyone else is over it. Moving on, going to work, complaining that I served them their tea in a go cup instead of a nice metal pot. It's maddening because other's of us are still struggling to fit into what is a totally different life. It makes me want to wear a shirt that says, "my house got flooded", or "I lived in mid-city". I feel like one of just a handful of folks holding a torch for this city. If the hurricane was like a slow cancerous death, this recovery has been that kind of fragile, delicate recovery that has one looking at the survivor with sweetness, an added joy that carefully tries to conceal the fear that maybe it just isn't real. That maybe it isn't over yet. Lining up for our first Mardi Gras parade had me in tears, looking at the beauty and the resilience of my people. And seeing the skeleton crew, a mass of masqueraders in skeleton costumes like those of the day of the dead, had me having to walk away from the celebration to have a long cry. The dead of this storm will always linger over my shoulder, and I will never be able to look at my city without the appreciation of its

strength and impermanence again, without remembering that any day, we could still get washed away. My mind will always be called back to those first strange days home. When there was nothing but abandoned homes and animals, a silent wasteland. In some ways, it was almost like living in the city I had always wanted - quiet, secret, beautiful. Who knows, maybe next summer I'll get to have it back.

shelley
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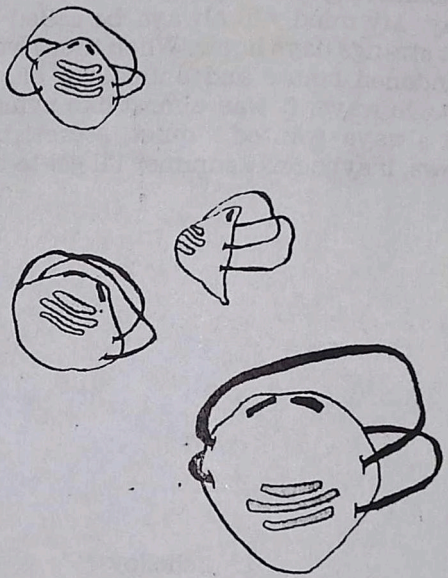

Shelle..
[redacted]
N.O.L.A
70179.

new orleans . . my love.